



“Acting In Faith”

Study: Ezra 8:1-23

Reading: Hebrews 11:1-40

Memory: Matthew 5:2

As a pastor, I have found that it is very easy to talk about faith and trust, especially while everything is going well, but it is much harder to live out that faith when it is put to the test. For instance, I can boldly declare that God will provide for all my needs, but when the bills have piled up and my sources of income started to dry up, it had been much harder to trust that God will provide. When this has happened in my life, there were temptations to stray from God’s plan in order to provide for my family, but I had to choose to exercise faith and trust that God would provide for us.

Today, we are going to read how Ezra struggled with his choice to step out in faith and trust God, but he overcame that struggle through a time of prayer and fasting.

What Does the Bible Say?

Ezra recorded the families that traveled with him from Babylonia to Jerusalem. For devotional purposes, we won’t look at each name, but note that the names listed represented the heads of the families and the number of males that were part of that family were listed. In total, the men numbered 1,496 and it is estimated that with women and children the total number could have been between 7,000 to 8,000 people (vs 1-14).

All those who were traveling with Ezra met him at the river that runs through Ahava. This location is unknown to us today, but it was most likely a river that flowed into the Euphrates. For the first part of their journey they most likely would have followed the Euphrates river. They were there for three days so Ezra could record all those who came to be a part of this journey. He also wanted to see who it was that could help serve in the temple. After he finished recording the travelers, he realized that there were no Levites who chose to travel with him (vs 15).

Ezra called for the Jewish leaders and asked them to go to Iddo, who was the head of the Levites living in Babylonia. They were to ask him to send some of the Levites with the group so they would have people

who were eligible to serve in the temple. The Levites chose to send some men who were well respected among them. Ezra now had 38 Levites and 220 temple servants that were traveling with him (vs 16-20).

Before they began their travels, Ezra called for a time of prayer and fasting. He wanted the people to see the importance of humbling themselves before God. He knew that if they did this and asked God for protection and safety on this journey, that God would hear and answer. The humanity of Ezra can be seen in verse 22 as he described how he didn't want to ask the king for protection since he already told the king that God would be with them and God would protect them. Trusting God is not always easy for His children and it often seems much easier to trust in the protection from the world, but he needed to live out the faith that he displayed before the king. The way to overcome his fear and increase his faith was to fast and pray for God's protection (vs 21-23).

How Does this Apply to Me?

Do you realize that the men of faith in the Bible struggled at times with trusting in God? It was easy for Ezra to tell the king that he didn't need an escort because His God could keep them safe, but it must have been a little more difficult to put this faith into practice. You will face times like this in your life where it is easy to talk about trusting in God, but it is much harder to do it. The solution for Ezra was not to go back to the king and show his lack of faith, but to fast and pray to help increase his faith. When you face times in your life where your faith is put to the test, choose not to trust in the world, but take time to pray and fast for God's provision and protection. The journey they were about to set out on would not be an easy one, but they knew that with God on their side, they would be successful.

Suggestions for Prayer

- * *Thank God for providing for all your needs.*
- * *Ask God to help you live out your faith.*
- * *Praise God because He will never fail you.*

Thought for the day

What list did Ezra give at the beginning of chapter 8?

Why do you think he gave this list?

What does this reveal about the number of people who were traveling with him?

Why do you think traveling with a large group like this would be difficult?

What did Ezra do for three days (vs 15)? Why do you think he did this?

How did Ezra take care of his problem of not having any Levites (vs 166-17)?

What lesson in leadership can be learned from this act?

What was the result of this act (vs 17-19)?

Why do you think it was important to Ezra to have Levites and temple servants?

Why do you think some people were hesitant to go?

What did Ezra proclaim (vs 21)?

Why was this an important act?

What was Ezra ashamed to do (vs 22)?

How have you felt like Ezra?

Why is it easy to talk about faith, but harder to live it out?

What do you think they not only prayed, but also fasted (vs 23)?

What was the result of this action?

How do you see the importance of prayer and fasting through this?

“Protection and Provision”

Study: Ezra 8:24-36

Reading: Philippians 4:10-20, Matthew 14:13-21

Memory: Matthew 5:2

Ever since my wife and I had our first child, we have both had to choose faith over fear in different areas of our lives. For me, I would say the biggest area where I have had to trust God is for His provision. Being a pastor of small churches has never produced much income for our family. For almost all of my married life I have had two or more jobs to help make ends meet. Trusting God to give us what we need has always been a struggle for me, but He has proven Himself faithful. Though I am sure my wife has worried a little about provision, I believe one of her greater concerns has been protection for our children. These two things are not unique to us, but are struggles that many people can relate with.

Today, we are going to be reminded how God will provide supernatural provision and protection when we look to Him and choose to carry out His plan.

What Does the Bible Say?

Following a time of prayer and fasting, Ezra appointed twelve leading priests to watch over the offerings that were given for the temple. This would have been no small task. Not only were they responsible for keeping it safe, but they would also have to be in charge of the transportation of it. These items would have weighed around 35 tons and would have required several animals to haul this treasure. This was a very important task because these items had been given for the use in the temple and they had been set apart for God. These items would provide valuable help in the proper worship in the temple (vs 24-30).

They headed out in the first month on the twelfth day from Ahava on their long journey to Jerusalem. Ezra clearly knew that the hand of God was on them because they were delivered from any ambushes or problems along the way. Though they were traveling in the Persian empire with orders from the king, safety was still a great concern because of the large amount of valuables they were carrying. Once they arrived

in Jerusalem, they remained there for three days, most likely to rest and get their bearings after a long journey. On the fourth day, they weighed out all the valuables to make sure everything was still there. This was an important step of integrity and honesty. The valuables were handed over to the temple treasury. The temple had been completed around 516 B.C. and Ezra arrived around 458 B.C. (vs 31-34).

These newly returned exiles offered burnt offerings to God and celebrated the fact that God had allowed them to return to the land of their forefathers. Ezra also took time to travel to the local governors of the area to give them the instructions that had been given by Artaxerxes. These instructions described how the regions around Israel were to help the Jews financially and to also help provide them with many of the animals needed for their sacrifices (vs 35-36).

How Does this Apply to Me?

The miraculous safety that God provided for Ezra and the others on this trip can not be over emphasized. You read yesterday how Ezra chose not to ask the king for an escort because He had boldly declared that God would keep them safe. The returning exiles were not soldiers and were not heavily armed. They would have been an easy target for criminals or small rebel forces, yet the protection of God was on them. Not only did God provide incredible safety for them, but He also provide all they needed to properly worship Him at the temple. We are given a little information about the state of Jewish worship in the temple and know that they had already strayed from God’s plan in the 68 years since the temple was finished. Having enough sacrifices available for an additional 6,000-8,000 people would have been difficult to find, but God made a way through the pagan governors in the region. This should be a great reminder to you that when you are doing what God desires, His hand of provision and protection will be with you each step of the way.

Suggestions for Prayer

- * *Thank God for His provision and protection.*
- * *Ask God to help you live in faith instead of fear.*

Thought for the day

Who did Ezra set apart (vs 24)? Why?

Why do you think Ezra weighed the valuables that were with him (vs 25)?

Where had these valuables come from (vs 25)?

How can you see the working of God in this?

Why do you think Ezra described the amount of valuables they had been given (vs 26-27)?

What does this reveal about the great provision of God?

What did Ezra say to those in charge of the treasury (vs 28)? Why do you think he said this?

What charge did Ezra give to these men (vs 29)?

Why do you think this was a very important task (vs 29-30)?

What did Ezra say God did for them (vs 31)?

What does this reveal about the possible danger they were facing?

How does this remind you of the importance of trusting God?

What did they do when they reached Jerusalem (vs 32)?

How long had their journey taken them (see Ezra 7:8-9)?

What did they do with the treasures (vs 33)?

Why do you think Ezra emphasized how everything was weighed again (vs 34)?

What did the returned exiles do on the fourth day (vs 35)?

What role did the regional leaders around Israel play (vs 36)?

“Learning From the Past”

Study: Ezra 9:1-9

Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:1-11:1

Memory: Matthew 5:2

Several years ago, I was given a book written by one of my great, great grandfathers and a shorter one written by his wife. He was a circuit riding preacher in the wilderness of Nebraska. As I read through the books, I was challenged by the great sacrifices that he made to share the Word of God with others and how he greatly desired to encourage the believers in the frontier. Yet, at the same time, I realized how his commitment to his ministry took him away from his family for months at a time, causing some great conflict in his own family. This allowed me some great insight into the importance of balancing out ministry and family in my life and I greatly valued the lessons I learned from the past.

Today, we will be reminded how easy it is to fail to learn from the past. We will read about the sinful conditions that Ezra found in the land of Israel, though it had only been a little under 70 years since the temple had been rebuilt.

What Does the Bible Say?

Once Ezra and the new exiles started settling in the land, some of the leaders came to Ezra revealing that they discovered that the Israelites who were living in the land were not following the law. If you remember, Ezra was known for his meticulous attention to the law and he had been told by Artaxerxes to teach this law to the others who were traveling with him. It would be safe to assume that Ezra took time during their four month journey to help teach the law to the people. When the newly returned exiles discovered the condition of the Jews already living in the land, they knew something needed to be done. One of the main areas the people had failed in keeping the law was that they had chosen to intermarry with the people of the land. This had nothing to do with racial bias, but was about the purity and godliness of the people of Israel. By intermarrying with the pagan people of the land, they were also welcoming their gods and false ways of worship into their families. This

violation of the law was promoted by the examples of the leaders, which made it much more dangerous (vs 1-2).

Upon hearing this news, Ezra tore his garment and pulled out his hair on his head and his face. This was a symbolic gesture to show how distraught he was over the sin of the people of Israel. He was joined in the mourning by many of the other Israelites who were also appalled by what they found in the land of Israel. When the time came to offer the evening sacrifice, Ezra rose up from his time of fasting and mourning. He fell on his knees and hands and began praying to God (vs 3-5).

In his prayer, Ezra declared how he was ashamed and embarrassed because of the actions of Israel and he felt that he could not lift up his face towards God because of the sin and guilt of the children of Israel. The very sins the people were committing was the cause for the destruction of Israel and the reason they were exiled from the land. Ezra clearly understood that it was only by God's grace that He allowed His people to return to the land and to rebuild the temple. God had given them this grace and freedom from their slavery and captivity. This grace had been shown through the king of Persia and God had blessed them to return. Ezra sought for the people to repent and pleaded for God's mercy knowing that the end result would be terrible for them if they did not turn back to God (vs 6-9).

How Does this Apply to Me?

Do you see the tendency of human nature? Most of the Israelites who were living in the land were descendants of those who had returned with Zerubbabel and Joshua about 85 years before. Their fathers and grandfathers had experienced a great revival through the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah, yet much of this had been forgotten. The people were committing the same sins and in the same way that their forefathers had been when Nebuchadnezzar first attacked them 150 years before. Think about this timing in your life. Most people know little about what took place spiritually in their families 80-100 years ago. It is easy to get so involved in your current generation that you neglect to learn from those who have gone before. Great things can be learned from the failure and victories of those who have gone before you. You would be wise to make an effort to become a student of the past which will help you learn the wise choice to make today and will help you in your future.

Suggestions for Prayer

* *Ask God to help you learn from the past.*

What things was Ezra talking about in verse 1?

Who had become concerned when they recognized the condition of the Israelites who lived in the land (vs 1)?

What had the people failed to do (vs 1)?

Why was this such a problem?

What had they done (vs 2)?

Who had been the main perpetrators of the law (vs 2)?

How is this different than racism?

Why are the problems more serious when the leaders are the ones who are doing what is wrong?

How did Ezra respond when he heard what had been happening (vs 3)?

Who came to join Ezra (vs 4)?

What did Ezra do at the time for the evening sacrifice (vs 5)?

Why was Ezra ashamed to lift up his face to God (vs 6)?

Why do you think he felt this shame though he hadn't committed the sins?

What did Ezra recognize about the guilt of the nation (vs 7)?

What did Ezra recognize about what God had done (vs 8)?

What had many of the Jews been experiencing (vs 8)?

How did God show His love to the children of Israel (vs 9)?

Why is it important to recognize what God has done for you?

“True Confession”

Study: Ezra 9:10-10:3

Reading: 2 Chronicles 29:3-19, Exodus 32:1-35

Memory: Matthew 5:2

Early in my marriage, there was something I was doing that I knew was wrong, but I didn't think it was that big of a deal. After a while, my wife and I had a serious talk about this action and she would not end the conversations until I understood how serious this sin was. I would admit it was wrong and say I would do my best not to do it again, but she understood something that I didn't. She realized I was not confessing and repenting, but only acknowledging my action was wrong. She helped me see it from a different perspective and I chose to confess that sin before the Lord, recognizing how serious it was.

Today, we are going to see how Ezra's actions revealed the great wickedness of the sins of Israel. Ezra knew that true confession was the only way to stave off the punishment of God.

What Does the Bible Say?

After finding out about the sins of the people who were living in Israel, Ezra fell on his knees and began to pray. He continued this prayer in verse 10 as he declared that there was no excuse for how the children of God were living. They had disregarded the commands of God and chose to intermarry with the foreign nations. This had welcomed the pagan practices into Jewish homes and mixed the worship of God with the worship of idols. Ezra recounted how God has specifically told the Israelites not to give their sons and daughters to the people of the surrounding nations. This was a common practice to help create peace treaties and encourage trade among nations. Yet, by following this practice, the land would not be kept for Israel, but would be divided among foreigners. This action also displayed a lack of trust in God because they chose to use earthly methods to help take care of them rather than trusting God to help provide for their needs (vs 10-12).

This same practice had become a common part of Jewish life before the destruction of Israel and was one of the key reasons for the punishment from God. The people were now doing the very same thing

their forefathers were punished for 150 years before. Ezra knew if this practice continued that God would once again consume the people and destroy the nation. The number of Jews alive was relatively small and another period of destruction could wipe them out all together. Ezra concluded this prayer by confessing that the people were guilty and declared that what was happening was wrong (vs 13-15).

As many heard the confession of Ezra, they gathered around him and they also began to weep and lift up their voices to God. One of the leaders who was living in Israel had family members involved in this sin. He came to Ezra, admitting that the people were living in sin. He knew they had broken the law, but he also understood that there was hope for them if they repented. He proposed that the people make a covenant with God to divorce any foreign wives and send the children of these marriages back with their wives to their own lands. Though this is a little difficult for us to understand in our society today, this is what the law of God required. God does hate divorce (Malachi 2:6), but He also hates idolatry and the wickedness that lead His people from Him. It was much better for men to divorce the pagan wives than it would be to allow them to continue to corrupt the people with their false gods and ungodly forms of worship (vs 1-3).

How Does this Apply to Me?

Do you realize the importance of confession? The confession that Ezra presented here reveals to you how vital it is for you to agree with God concerning the wickedness of your sin. It is very easy to know something is not right and even admit that it is wrong, but when you choose to view sin as wicked and realize how terrible it is, that is a much different matter. It is very easy to continue in sin when you only mentally acknowledge that it is not good for you, but when you choose to confess, agreeing with God about the wickedness of your actions, that opens the door for repentance. One of the reasons many believers never get victory over their sins is because they admit it is wrong, but they often stop short of confessing and repenting.

Thought for the day

What did Ezra say the people had done (vs 10)?

How were the nations who lived in and around Israel described (vs 11)?

What had God instructed (vs 12)?

Why would seeking peace and prosperity lead to mixed marriages (vs 12)?

How can seeking peace and prosperity through the world lead to problems today?

What did God want the Israelites to do with the land of Israel (vs 12)?

What did Ezra recognize about what had happened to Israel (vs 13)?

Why did Ezra describe them as a remnant (vs 13)?

What did Ezra not want the people to do again (vs 14)?

What did Ezra fear God would do (vs 14)?

How did Ezra describe God (vs 15)?

What confession did Ezra make (vs 15)?

Why was this confession so important (vs 15)?

How were the actions of Ezra described (vs 1)?

Who joined Ezra (vs 1)? Why do you think they joined him?

Who approached Ezra (vs 2)?

What did he declare (vs 2)?

Why was this an important declaration?

What did he propose (vs 3)?

“Acting With Boldness”

Study: Ezra 10:4-15

Reading: Joshua 1:1-9, Galatians 6:1-10

Memory: Matthew 5:2

A few years after I became a senior pastor, it was brought to my attention that one of the members of the church was involved in a sexual sin. I approached this person privately, but they were not willing to confess and repent. I had them meet with the elder board and this person was still defiant. Finally, with a breaking heart, I had to present this person that I cared deeply for, to the church for church discipline. That was one of the hardest things I ever had to do in ministry, but I was left with no other choice. I had to obey God’s Word concerning the issue.

Today, we are going to see how Ezra was called on to take bold action to help restore holiness to the children of Israel.

What Does the Bible Say?

Shecaniah came to Ezra and confessed that those dwelling in the land had been sinning. Shecaniah then told Ezra to get up and to perform the task that needed to be performed. He, along with many others who were praying and confessing, were going to stand behind Ezra. The next step that Ezra needed to take required great boldness because it was about to upend the lives of many people. Ezra and many of the other leaders took an oath before God that they would enforce God’s law and remove the pagan spouses and children from the land (vs 4-5).

Ezra left the temple and went to the house of Jehohanan where he spent the night. He refused to eat or drink because he was still in mourning over the sin of the people. The next day, Ezra sent a message throughout all Judah calling for all the Israelites living in the land to assemble in Jerusalem. Those who chose not to show up would forfeit any portion of the land that they had been given. Those failing to show up would also be banned from joining the other returned exiles in their times of worship and celebration. Basically, those who did not show up would forfeit any of the rights and privileges of being children of Israel (vs 6-8).

The great consequences for not showing up inspired all those who claimed to be Israelites to assemble in Jerusalem. It was now the ninth month, four months after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. All the people sat in the open square in front of the temple and many were quite scared because of the seriousness of the matter. This, combined with heavy rain, made it a scene where many people shook with fear and cold (vs 9-10).

Ezra stood up and began to declare that the people had broken their covenant by marrying foreign wives. They were guilty before the Lord and they needed to confess and repent of their wicked deeds. This repentance would be evident when they chose to separate themselves from their foreign wives. The people declared they would follow what Ezra commanded. They did ask Ezra if they could take time to do this because it was raining and also because it was a great task. They would carry out the divorces and then stand before the leaders of their cities to give witness of their obedient actions. This would probably also give them time to help make sure their wives made it back to their homes in the foreign lands safely. It appears that a few men disagreed with prolonging the action and wanted everything done right there, but the majority of them felt like the plan was a good one (vs 11-15).

How Does this Apply to Me?

Though Ezra was a great man of God and knew the law, he was also human, and having to make the people divorce their wives must have been a task that would have been difficult. Shecaniah encouraged him to get up and do what needed to be done. This gave Ezra the encouragement and support that he needed to carry out these extreme measures. Remember, he was dealing with people who would have had great emotional attachment to their wives and children and who were going to be forced to leave them for good. This is a good reminder that some times standing up for what is right will take boldness. It will not always be easy to do the right thing, especially when human emotions are going to be highly involved. Yet, for the sake of God and holiness, sometimes these actions need to be taken.

Suggestions for Prayer

- * *Thank God for others who come along side you to help you do what is right.*
- * *Ask God to act with boldness when doing the hard thing.*

What did Shecaniah tell Ezra to do (vs 4)?

Why would this have taken great strength and boldness?

Describe a time in your life where you had to exercise great boldness in obedience to God.

What did Ezra make the leaders do (vs 5)?

Why do you think he did this?

What did Ezra do that night (vs 6)?

Why do you think he prayed and fasted?

What proclamation did Ezra issue (vs 7)?

What was the punishment for those who did not come (vs 8)?

Why do you think Ezra gave such a severe punishment?

What does this reveal about the importance of being serious when it comes to sin that affects a congregation?

What did all the men of the land of Judah and Benjamin do (vs 9)?

Where did the people gather (vs 9)?

Why were they trembling (vs 9)?

What did Ezra declare (vs 10-11)?

How did the people respond (vs 12)?

What was their proposal (vs 13-14)?

What did they realize about God's mercy (vs 14)?

Why do you think some people didn't care for this proposal (vs 15)?

“Do Not Give Up”

Study: Ezra 10:16-44, 4:7-10

Reading: 2 Chronicles 15:1-18

Memory: Matthew 5:2

When my wife and I finished building our guest house for pastors and their families, I had a handful of people tell me how impressed they were to see something finished. Their comments seemed odd to me at first, but when I talked with them more, I discovered that they had known many people who had great visions of what they thought God wanted them to do, but those people became sidetracked and never finished the work they started. As I thought about their comments, some people that I knew came to my mind and I realized that I had observed much of the same.

Today, we are going to read how Ezra chose to make sure the reforms he instituted were carried out. He didn't just give the command, but stuck with it and established a system to make sure his plan was accomplished.

What Does the Bible Say?

After agreeing to give the men time to divorce their pagan wives, Ezra appointed several of the elders in the land to be responsible to make sure each man did the right thing. These elders were to examine every man who had a foreign wife and judge whether or not that man ended the relationship. It is important to note that the reason the women did not have to divorce the men was because in that culture the wives moved to where their husband was from. Israelite women were sent to the foreign nations, while the foreign wives were sent to live in Israel (vs 16-17).

Verses 18-43 list men who had taken foreign wives. There are 118 men listed, but most likely the actual number was much more. The elders started their inquiry in the 10th month and did not finish until the 1st month. The time it took seems to indicate there were many more men than the ones listed. As is often the case, most likely only certain leaders or important individuals are recorded in this passage. It is clear from verse 44 that there were children involved and we would assume that provision was made for the wife and children, though we are not sure. In

that culture, a woman would be sent back home and placed under her family's care. The family would help the divorced woman raise her children (vs 18-43).

As we have seen before, many passages in the Bible are not in chronological order, but often arranged topically. In chapter 4, Ezra was covering the topic of enemies sending letters to try to stop the work at Jerusalem. We read how a work stoppage was attempted when the temple was being rebuilt, and now we read how it was being attempted when the walls of the city were being rebuilt, though this event was around 70 years later. We are not given an exact time frame for this, but it is assumed to be between the arrival of Ezra (458 B.C.) and the news of the walls being unfinished that reached Nehemiah in 446 B.C.

As the Jews were attempting to rebuild Jerusalem, the governors of Samaria and surrounding regions didn't like what was taking place. They wrote a letter to Artaxerxes with their concerns. These governors described themselves as people who lived "beyond the river" which most likely meant west of the Euphrates. Most were not native to the land, but had been placed there by the Assyrians to intermarry with the local inhabitants a few hundred years before. The next several verses is the letter that was sent to Artaxerxes (vs 7-11).

How Does this Apply to Me?

Are you committed to carrying out the task that God has called you to? One of the great characteristics of Ezra is that he was determined to do what God wanted, even if it was going to hurt him or others. You read about this when he set out for Jerusalem and you continued to read about it as he took the bold steps of making the Israelites divorce their foreign wives. He also did what he could to make sure the job was carried out. He didn't just tell the people to divorce their wives, but he made sure to appoint leaders who would follow up to make sure that every man did what they were supposed to do. This is a great reminder of the importance of being committed and carrying something through to its completion. When God calls you to do something, don't just start, but make sure you commit and carry it out to the end.

Suggestions for Prayer

- * *Thank God for giving you the strength to carry out His plan.*
- * *Ask God to help you press on until your task is finished.*

What decision had been made in verses 14-15?

What did the returned exiles do (vs 16)?

Why do you think Ezra called them “returned exiles” (vs 16)?

How did Ezra make sure the task was carried out (vs 16)?

Who else helped Ezra select the leaders (vs 16)?

Why do you think it was important that Ezra included them in the decision making process?

What can you learn from this?

When did they start the examinations (vs 16)?

When did they finish the examinations (vs 17)?

Why do you think it took two months?

Why do you think that Ezra and the other leaders wanted to be so thorough?

What was the end result (vs 17)?

Ezra 4

Who wrote to Artaxerxes (vs 7)?

Why do you think they wrote in Aramaic (vs 7)?

****Aramaic was the official language of the Persian empire.*

What was the letter against (vs 8)?

Why do you think they didn't want Jerusalem rebuilt?

How can you see this same conflict existing today?

Memory Verse:

Matthew 5:1 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: